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ABSTRACT

The language experience approach (LEA) is a means of using the knowledge of language and one's life experiences to create materials for reading and thoughtful consideration. Therefore, LEA seems to be a viable approach to use both with students who are not familiar with the language used or experiences described in a textbook and with older students who are deficient in their reading ability, as well as to teach writing in conjunction with reading. In the LEA, the teacher provides students with a stimulus, such as a picture, object, film, or song, and after a period of thought, students give their comments or interpretations and select key words. The students then think about a story they would like to write that is related to the stimulus and develop an outline. A first draft is written, and spelling, sentence construction, and word choice are discussed. A final draft is completed, and the story is "published" for other students in the class to read. Such an approach allows the teacher to seek out those topics and areas of interest that students may be eager to learn about, read about, and write about. (HTH)

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EXPERIENCES TO READING:

A Language Experience Approach For Secondary School Students

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Experiences to Reading

The language experience approach, or LEA, is a means of utilizing the knowledge of language, and the experiences of life one has, in order to create matter to be read and thoughtfully considered. The processes of listening, speaking, writing, and reading -- all purposeful communication -- are what combine to form the LEA. (Hall, 1978).

Through the LEA the student comes to a realization that he or she has language and experiences which are useful and that can be written down. This provides many students with a reason to read. (Stauffer, 1976).

When a student creates his or her own reading material, it represents that student's experiences and language patterns. This activity and its result seem to make language experience a viable approach to use with students who are not familiar with the language and/or the experiences described in many textbooks. It would also appear to be a reason for using the LEA with older students who are deficient in their reading ability.

The LEA also has been used to teach writing in conjunction with reading. Because the students' own language is being utilized and that language is viewed as being acceptable, the students' attitude toward themselves, their reading, and their writing is improved. Mallett (1977) found that this gain was also evident in vocabulary development while a definite improvement was found in the

students' writing and attitude toward reading.

One important aspect of the LEA appears to be that it focuses on student learning rather than teacher teaching (Pienaar, 1977). As the student views his or her language as being acceptable as it is written, and later read, it helps in building the student's self-esteem. This is so important when working with older students who have viewed reading and writing as activities that produce only failure, for the LEA does not present the student with false expectations.

Materials that are produced by students through the LEA are motivating because the students create them themselves. The students will read such material that they and their peers have helped to write. It helps to make students aware that the written word is theirs, having emanated from their own consciousness (Chomsky, 1977).

The LEA uses the premise that students react in a more positive manner to material that is relevant to them. This relevance allows for a coordination between the student's spoken and written language, as the reading materials will reflect the student's own language and experience. Students also can be given an opportunity to share the material they have developed with their fellow students. Because the language is familiar to the students they can more readily utilize skills of context clues to aid themselves in word recognition and comprehension of the material (Lopardo, 1975).

Since, obviously, almost all secondary school students are users of language and have had numerous experiences in their lives, it is sensible to assume that such learners can utilize such linguistic and real-life experiences in conjunction with the reading programs in which they are involved. When a student creates his or her own reading material, it represents that student's experiences and language patterns, which seem to make the LEA a sensible approach to use with secondary school students. It seems specifically useful for students who are not familiar with the language and/or many of the experiences described in textbooks, or who have not developed adequate reading strategies to cope with the assigned tasks. Because the students' own language is utilized and viewed as acceptable, their attitude toward themselves, toward reading, and toward writing may be improved.

Through the LEA students can be given an opportunity to share the material they have developed with their fellow students. As the language is familiar to the students they can more readily employ their skills in utilizing context clues with the material.

The LEA can be a group oriented means of instruction. Students are provided with a stimulus which can range from an activity in which they are engaged, a play that they read, a film which they viewed, a record to which they have listened, a photograph that they were shown, or any of a number of other motivating experiences.

The stimulus is then discussed by the students, key words may be suggested by the students or the teacher, and ideas that are applicable to the stimulus are discussed. The students then utilize their experience with the stimulus, the discussion during which the members of the group have shared their ideas, and their understanding of the key words to develop a paragraph, story, play or other written work that relates to the stimulus.

The written work prepared by the students is then duplicated, and shared with the other students in the group. The students participate, together, in reading their fellow student's work. The student author realizes a sense of accomplishment in seeing his or her written work as having been published for others to read. The students in the group may provide criticism of the work, and suggestions to the author for changes. The teacher may offer suggestions as well. The work may be rewritten by the student author, refinement of the written work may be made, and the students may have some experience with improving their written language structure and use of written language.

Is there a theoretical foundation for the LEA?

Kenneth Goodman and Frank Smith, psycholinguistic theoreticians, have not specifically discussed the use of a LEA, but many aspects of their theories of reading, and reading instruction, maximize the use of the LEA.

Goodman (1976) has suggested that the reading curriculum be relevant to the student, thereby enabling the learner to utilize the experiences and competence that the learner has. This language and subject familiarity assists the learner in sampling and drawing upon syntactic and semantic information to better understand what is being read; to realize the redundancy and sequential constraints in the language; and to predict, anticipate, and sample from the reading matter enough to confirm a guess as to what is coming. The LEA group cooperation that results in the writing and reading activities assists the reader with the use of the syntactic context, a use of an aspect of language important in Goodman's theoretical view. In addition, this relationship between a concrete experience and the printed word is a further aide in understanding the printed word.

Hence, if the printed reading material is consistent with the reader's understanding of the meanings and the use of oral language, the learner should be able to use his or her linguistic competence, and the constraints and redundancies of language, to form expectancies, and to predict and confirm the meaning.

Reading material developed in a group situation results in the reader's participation from the point of stimulation. This participation enables the reader to use nonvisual information that can be brought to assist him or her in understanding

the written discourse. Smith (1978) used the term "nonvisual information" to refer to the reader's knowledge of the language, subject matter, how to read, and redundancy. Through the LEA the readers have an understanding of the language that is used by themselves and their peers, participate in the discussion of the subject matter before the matter is written, and can make use of redundancy in the material, due to a familiarity with the language and subject matter. All of the nonvisual information that the reader can cull makes it possible for the reader to rely less on the visual information. For the students who are not fluent readers, the more nonvisual information that is part of their background with relation to specific matter, the easier will it be for them to read the matter.

The LEA provides the relevance, builds upon the reader's nonvisual information background, and aids the reader in attending to the matter's meaning.

If the reader sees relevance in what is being read, and has a background of experiences from which to draw to assist with the understanding of the material, then the reader's attitude toward reading may be more positive than it otherwise would be (Mathewson, 1976). For the student who has experienced failure with reading for several years, reading material that is relevant, and utilizes a subject matter with which the reader is familiar, may help to improve that student's attitude toward reading.

In summary, the psycholinguistic theoretical frame of reference suggests that the reader is the embodiment of his or her experiences -- experiences which are brought to the act of reading. The LEA is a method of reading instruction that utilizes the student's experiences, which is manifested in the language that the student uses. The LEA exploits the experiences of the student in a way which most supports reading success.

The Procedure

Now, what exactly is to be done? How can this theoretical framework truly lead to something that can be used in a classroom? How can the teenage student, who is deficient in reading, be assisted in what may be considered an enjoyable manner, to realize reading improvement?

The LEA that I am discussing can be done individually, but was designed to be used in a group situation.

The procedure is teacher initiated. The students are given a stimulus, provided by the teacher. For example, a possible stimulus could be a picture. The students are given a few moments to look at the picture, and think about what it reminds them of, or what the picture shows. They are then asked to individually give their comment or interpretation. As each student speaks, key words are selected by the teacher, and written on the board. An alternative method is to ask the students to write, individually, a few words related to the picture. They can then read a word, or

the words that they wrote. These words can then be written on the board.

After each student has been given the opportunity to contribute to the discussion, or to offer a key word, the students review the key words on the board, and add any that they so choose to. The teacher may elect to expand upon the discussion and word list with other words that would be helpful for the students.

Next, the students are asked to begin to think about a story that they would like to write which would be related to the picture. An outline, or organization sheet, will be developed. This can be presented to students in a variety of formats. A paper mapped out into boxes may focus upon the sequence of events that the students envision will occur in their stories. Another outline sheet may list question words for which the details of the story will provide the answers. The organization paper can take whatever form the teacher, or student, deems appropriate for that particular story. When the students, individually, have completed their outline sheets, they read them themselves, then aloud to the teacher. Spelling is noted, and depending upon the student, the word can be either written on an index card by the teacher (to be later reviewed), or the first few letters can be provided, and blank slots noted for each remaining letter, which

the student will fill in. The student and teacher can discuss aspects of the outline that may be unclear, and the outline can be expanded.

The outlining, and review of the outline, is followed by the student writing a first draft of a story. This is an expansion of the outline. For this, the student writes on every other line so that changes or additions can be made later. When completed, the student reads the story silently, then aloud to the teacher, and, if the student so chooses, reads it to another student. As the story is read, the student may pause to note changes, or, after the reading is concluded, the student may make refinements. Again, spelling is noted. Now, sentence construction can be considered, or word choice discussed, or whatever is deemed appropriate for that student in relation to that particular piece of writing can be further explored.

With the first draft completed, the student then rewrites the story on another paper (I used yellow paper for the first draft, and white for the revision). The revision is also written on every other line, and is checked by a silent reading, then oral reading by the student to the teacher.

If the student agrees, and they usually are flattered by the suggestion, the piece can be readied for "publication." The published story will be read by the other students in the class,

and will, in fact, be a class reading activity. The cloze procedure can be applied to the story, deleting either every fifth or tenth word.

To prepare the story, then, for the class reading activity, the student or teacher copies the story onto a stencil. (I have found that many students take great pride in writing the stencil themselves).

The next day, when the students come to class, they find a story, written by one of their classmates, or themselves. They begin work on that immediately, as there usually is great interest in whose story was published, and an eagerness to read the story.

When all students have completed the story and filling in the blank spaces (if the cloze procedure had been applied), the original author reads the story aloud. Other students can volunteer to read their versions aloud as well. Students usually volunteer their criticism, and changes that the author deems appropriate can be made.

For the example that I used here, a picture was used as the stimulus. Other stimuli that can be used include writing a reaction to a story or play that is read together, writing an ending for a story or play, listening to old radio broadcasts, or viewing films, and writing reactions to them.

The student reaction need not always take the form of a story. Some students enjoy writing plays, which are later acted out by them and their classmates. The cloze procedure does not have to be applied.

Another more structured organizer or outline that the students can use is in the form of a framed paragraph. Here, the teacher may be interested in developing a specific understanding of a particular writing technique or use of language, such as transition words. For example, if the students have read a novel or short story, they can react to it by using an outline that includes transition words and clue words. Here, the students complete the outline. When they have completed this draft, they again read their work, first to themselves, then orally to the teacher. Changes can be made, additions can be made, and then the student rewrites the entire reaction. A review is again done by both student and teacher.

Many times, when a student is reading work to the teacher, and other students can listen if they choose to, other students make comments or suggestions to the author. Often, if the interest is great enough, the other students do stop their own work to participate in this step.

Students can, and should, be encouraged to assist each other. When reading each others work they are usually supportive, and provide positive reinforcement.

The students can, and do, enjoy their reading and writing activities when the LEA is utilized. You can adapt the procedure in any way that is appropriate for the students. The possibility of failure, of not having the right answer, is greatly reduced with this kind of program. Students are proud of their work, and enjoy seeing their own work met with approval by others. They begin to take pride in what they produce, and begin to realize that they, too, can read and write successfully.

In light of the current trend toward reducing funding for education, the LEA may be more easily utilized than a reading laboratory approach, which is so commonly used in secondary schools. The LEA requires little in the way of equipment and materials. The laboratory approach requires a continual updating of material, and reordering of consumable material.

The LEA is not a confining program of instruction. It allows the teacher to seek out those topics and areas of interest that the students may be more eager to learn about, read about, and write about. It provides for a completely individualized program wherein each student delves into a topic of interest to himself or herself, or a group-oriented program where the class, together, discusses and writes about the topic, followed by a reading of what they produced.

The class orientation, whether individualized, small group, or large group, can change constantly, depending upon the needs of the students, and the teacher's perceptions of what is most applicable.

The LEA can be expanded outside of the reading room to include the library, where students can be instructed in research skills, and utilize these skills to read material, and write about what they have read. So often, students who are part of a reading program are required, as most students in secondary schools are, to write research reports for their content area classes. The content area teacher assumes that his or her students know how to do a research report, and does not, usually, spend much time reviewing the procedure. By using a LEA to follow through on a topic that is of special interest to the student, the reading teacher is certainly providing instruction and practice of a skill that the secondary school student must master to meet success in subject area classes.

The LEA can be an effective means of enhancing students' attitudes, not only toward the act of reading, but towards themselves. The flexibility of the program allows for the time to have outside resource people come to talk to the students, or to have guests participate in activities with the students during the class, so as to broaden the students' understanding of themselves, and the world around them.

The LEA, in opposition to a laboratory approach, can be an effective approach to use in content area classes. The enumeration of vocabulary and concepts, the outlining of ideas together, and a writing activity based upon the topic of discussion, and to be shared among the students in the class, can be utilized in secondary school content area classes such as English, Social Studies, and Science.

The LEA also strongly coordinates the communication processes of listening, speaking, writing, and reading. It is a complete program in itself, and all that is required are pencils, paper, a teacher sensitive to student needs, and young people who have a wealth of experiences that have never been recognized.

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